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SUBJECT: GEORGIAN ARRESTS UPDATE -- SEPTEMBER 29

REF: TBILISI 2590

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b) & (d).

Summary

1. (C) As the Georgian-Russian confrontation over Russian military officers detained for spying enters its third day, the Georgians have been making their case with the diplomatic community and the public, releasing video and other evidence of espionage. OSCE Chair-in-Office de Gucht is planning to call Saakashvili at mid-day Tbilisi time on September 29 for reaction to the idea of releasing the Russians to OSCE. Post is urging the Georgians to expel the detained Russians and to avoid being drawn into any violent incidents with the Russians that could cause the situation to deteriorate further. End Summary.

Georgians Brief Dip Corps

2. (SBU) Georgian DFMs Chechelashvili and Kutelia briefed the diplomatic corps on the situation September 28, handing out a fact sheet (faxed to EUR/CARC) on the counterintelligence operation that resulted in the detention of four Russian officers and eleven Georgians September 27 (reftel). They stressed that the investigation had produced strong evidence of criminal activity, and that the detainees were being treated properly and in accordance with Georgia's international commitments, including bilateral agreements with Russia. They said Georgian DFM Manjgaladze was in Moscow and would meet with Russian DFM Karasin on September 29. (Note: Press reports September 29 indicated the meeting had been canceled. End Note.) They said they expected investigators to ask a court to issue a decree for two months of detention while the investigation continues. Kutelia said there had been previous cases of Russian espionage which the Georgians had handled quietly, at Russia's request. He said that in this case the actions went beyond all bounds in their threat to Georgian national security, and the Georgians believed they had to publicize them in order to serve as a deterrent against future actions.

Evidence Shown on TV, Internet

3. (SBU) The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) released video evidence September 28, which was shown on television and on the MOIA's website. The video, shot by hidden cameras, shows the detained Russians and Georgians together in various locations. In some footage money is being exchanged for documents. The released evidence also includes audio tapes and transcripts of incriminating comments made in intercepted calls between the Russian officers and their Georgian agents. The Georgian government has given this evidence to CNN, BBC, and other international media.

Russia Takes Steps in Response

¶4. (SBU) The Russian Embassy announced September 28 that it has stopped issuing visas to Georgian citizens. The Russians have also recalled their Ambassador. According to the Georgian government, this recall was for consultations in Moscow, not a permanent removal. The Russian Embassy is also making plans to evacuate dependents of its diplomats from Georgia.

OSCE Mission on Possible Role in Release

¶5. (SBU) OSCE Acting Head of Mission Veselin Nikolaev told DCM September 29 that the OSCE Task Force at the Belgian MFA had informed him that Belgian FM and OSCE Chair-in-Office (CIO) de Gucht would call Georgian President Saakashvili around mid-day Tbilisi time. Discussing the possibility that the four detained Russians might be released into OSCE custody, Nikolaev expressed to DCM some reluctance about the OSCE Mission getting involved and asked our view. DCM responded that if this is the agreed solution, it is better than allowing the current confrontation to continue. Nikolaev said that he and OSCE Head of Mission Roy Reeve (currently in London) told de Gucht that they are skeptical that the OSCE could offer the kind of assurances the Georgians would want that the Russians would stop the espionage, and they doubt the OSCE is best-placed to receive the Russian officers. Reeve suggested the Red Cross as an alternative to OSCE.

Urging the Georgians to Avoid Possible Flashpoints

¶6. (C) Ambassador urged PM Noghaideli and DFM Chechelashvili September 28 to de-escalate the tensions with Russian and expel the detained Russians as soon as possible. DCM

TBILISI 00002601 002 OF 002

followed up with Chechelashvili September 29, stressing the importance of dealing carefully with potential flashpoints with the Russians. One such flashpoint was Batumi; DCM noted that another incident like the one September 28, in which Georgian police detained Russians servicemen for carrying weapons, could lead to violence. DCM asked if the Georgian-Russian bilateral agreement gives the Russians the right to carry weapons. Chechelashvili said no -- any such transport of weapons requires approval in advance. He agreed another such incident would be dangerous, and DCM encouraged him to talk with the MOIA to minimize the risk. DCM said another potential flashpoint would be unauthorized overflights of Georgia by Russian planes; he urged the Georgians not to be provoked and to respond to any such incidents through normal diplomatic channels. Chechelashvili said he got the message on both potential flashpoints. (Note: Chechelashvili seemed unaware of the idea of an OSCE role in releasing the Russians; apparently Saakashvili has not discussed it with the MFA. End Note.)

Georgian Public Supports Actions

¶7. (SBU) Thus far all indications suggest the Georgian public firmly supports the government's actions in this counterintelligence operation. Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze gave voice to a common sentiment by noting that the Russian government has said practically nothing to dispute the charges against its officers. She argued that this indicates the Russians either do not care if the individuals were involved in spying, or are implicitly admitting that they were.

TEFFT